

Russian Academy of Sciences
(Ural Branch)
Institute of History and Archaeology

University of Chicago
Department of History

J.D. McCannon

The Soviet Arctic, 1920-1941:
New Trends in Western Historiography

Ekaterinburg, 1992

Russian Academy of Sciences
(Ural Branch)
Institute of History and Archaeology

University of Chicago
Department of History

J.D. McCannon

The Soviet Arctic, 1920-1941:
New Trends in Western Historiography

Edited by E.V. Logunov

Ekaterinburg, 1992

| |
|--|
| Федеральное государственное бюджетное учреждение науки Институт истории и археологии Уральского отделения Российской академии наук |
| от « » _____ 20__ г. |
| Вх. № _____ |

In his «The Russian in the Arctic», Terence Armstrong referred to the Soviet Arctic as «the place to watch»¹. In the 1930s, nothing could have been more true. The voyage of the Sibiriakov, the Cheliuskin epic, the establishment of the drifting station Severnyi poliush-1 (SP-1), and the transpolar flights of Chkalov and Gromov not only captivated the imagination of the Soviet public, but focused the attention of the world upon the USSR's exploits in the polar regions. Western scholars and scientists closely followed the work of their Soviet counterparts, while American and European journalists described events in the Soviet North to an eager public.

This attention died away in the West for several reasons. Western audiences looked for new heroes after the Second World War, at the same time that Soviet work in the Arctic was becoming routine and mundane — «too safe», especially in comparison with war heroics, Antarctic exploration, and the emerging space race. Even more importantly, the Cold war's impact on Western historiography made any positive mention of Soviet achievement ideologically inexpedient. The body of literature in the West dealing with the Russian Arctic had never been extensive, but, with only a few notable exceptions, it dwindled almost to a trickle after the war. During the late 1980s, however, Western interest in the Soviet Arctic during the 1920s and 1930s began to reemerge. At the present, a handful of scholars in the West is concentrating upon Soviet work in the polar regions during the prewar years.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: to discuss the standard Western materials concerning the Soviet North and to describe how new trends in Western historical studies are rekindling interest in the Soviet Arctic of the 1920s and 1930s and providing new visions of both the region itself and the Soviet Union as a whole during the Stalin years.

Historiography before the 1980s:

Although Soviet activity received substantial attention in the West, most of that attention was journalistic rather than scholarly. The Western press, therefore, remains a highly useful source, both for gleaning narrative facts and for revealing contemporary American and European attitudes toward Soviet work in the North. During the 1930s in particular, major newspapers such as the «New York Times», the «Washington Post», the